

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 29th April 2018

John 15: 1 - 8

Last week I was on holiday on the Spanish island of Ibiza. For those who don't know, over the past twenty years or so Ibiza has not been so much associated with holidays for middle-aged parents and children as a place for young people to go and party. I have to admit to a sheltered youth having never partied in Ibiza myself so it was only while there this week that I learned that Ibiza has the largest clubs in the world: there is one that alone can hold up to ten thousand people on a variety of what must be very large dance floors.

Party season hasn't yet begun in Ibiza for this year, so Sarah and I and our five-year-old son still have not had the pleasure of experiencing that scene. However, we did manage to enjoy some relaxing, rural tranquillity, sandy beaches, relatively long walks, fine food, and after one of us had gone to bed, the pleasure of reading good books. One of those good books that I read was the winner of a book prize, the Costa First Novel Award. *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, written by Gail Honeyman, who was born in Stirling, is a story about loneliness.

In Scotland and across the UK there is a growing awareness that loneliness, whether of the emotional kind when we miss the companionship of one particular person, or of the social kind when we lack a wider social network or group of friends is a growing problem that detrimentally affects people's mental and physical health.¹

A Scottish Health Council survey found that one in ten people in Scotland often feel lonely, and at the beginning of this year the Scottish Government published a draft document aimed at developing a national plan to tackle loneliness.² Recently, too, the Presbytery of Edinburgh held an event aimed at raising awareness in congregations of the problem of loneliness.

One of the surprising things about the award-winning novel is that the character at its heart, Eleanor Oliphant, who suffers from loneliness, is only 29 years old. In an age when clubs on Ibiza can each hold 10,000 partying young people, and in an age when technology has the capacity to connect those young people with other young people more successfully than ever before, *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* is a story about how more young people than ever before feel socially isolated.

As the author herself said, she was inspired to write her novel when she read a newspaper article that contained an interview with a young woman who said that she often left work on a Friday night at five o'clock and would not talk to another human being until Monday morning.³

¹ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/about-loneliness/>

² <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/speak-to-your-neighbours-to-reduce-loneliness-scots-told-1-4662997>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv6la7JfidY>

Loneliness is something that can affect anyone of any age. To that extent it might be easy to think that this phenomenon of loneliness has only recently been noticed because of the contrast it throws up alongside the phenomena of modern technologies that are able to connect us with people all over the world in cyber space or with others by way of cheap flights to super-clubs on Mediterranean Islands.

However, the truth is we have always known that people of all ages are too often lonely, and that loneliness has a terrible impact on our ability to flourish as people in this world, and our ability to live life in all its fullness as Jesus said that he wanted for us in an earlier chapter of the Gospel of John to the one we read this morning, 'I have come,' he said, 'that people may have life, and may have it in all its fullness.'⁴

A full life, or a fruitful life, is not a lonely life. As Jesus said in our reading this morning when he compared his followers to branches of a vine, 'No branch can bear fruit by itself.'⁵

In comparing his followers to branches of a vine Jesus was describing something about the human condition and our need for community with others, but he was also making a theological point about God, and our relationship to God.

Following the resurrection of Jesus it is the church, his body on earth that keeps him and his message about God alive in the world today. We can't be the church on our own. Jesus isn't kept alive by us as individuals, it is by living as a church together that Christ's life flourishes in the world. I didn't party in Ibiza, but I did discover that Ibizans make very nice wine, and driving around the countryside I saw that the vines from which the grapes come from are, like all vines, a mass of tangled branches. That is what gives these vines their strength, endurance and fruitfulness.

Christ lives when we together are his body on earth.

*I am the vine, and you are the branches, said Jesus, the one who dwells in me, as I dwell in him, bears much fruit; for apart from me you can do nothing.*⁶

But there is much more to Jesus' words in the gospel of John this morning than merely a theological statement about God and the way that God in the resurrected embodied Jesus of the church is still alive in the world. Jesus is also pointing out how it is that we ourselves might flourish in this world so that we are more likely to live life in all its fullness rather than experience life in the trough of isolation.

Since 2010 the UK Government has attempted to measure not just the country's economic health, its GDP, but its well-being⁷. The Office for National Statistics

⁴ John 10:10

⁵ John 15: 4

⁶ John 15: 5

produces an annual report detailing how the nation's well-being is improving or not. We might say that it analysis the state of the good news message about life in all its fullness amongst citizens of the UK, or the extent to which we, the branches of the country's tree, feel we are living barren or fruitful lives.

The Government identifies seven things that it can do to raise people's sense of their well-being, but it also identifies five things that we all can do as individuals to raise our sense of our well-being. One of those things we can do is to be active. In the Gospels Jesus doesn't mention the importance of keeping fit, presumably because keeping active was an inherent part of life in the first century, it couldn't be avoided.

But, of the other four ideas that the Government has encouraged us to do since 2010, all of them are found at the heart of Jesus' message about full lives and flourishing branches. Take notice, is the second thing to do: be curious of the world around you, catch sight of the beautiful, remark on the unusual, notice the changing seasons, savour the moment. Or, as Jesus said,

Consider the lilies: they neither spin or weave; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his splendour was not attired like one of these.⁸

Be active, take notice, and thirdly, keep learning. In Jesus' day that was called discipleship, and anyone who wanted to gain any spiritual enlightenment attached themselves to someone from whom they could learn. Learning was and still is a fundamental part of being a follower, a disciple of Jesus.

Along with being active, taking notice of the world around you, and life-long learning, you can simply give: do something nice for someone, smile, say thank you, volunteer. The Government has encouraged us to do that since 2010, it has been part of the Christian message since the story of the Suffering Servant found in the prophet Isaiah since before Jesus was born.

Finally, what is crucially important to a person's sense of their well-being is their ability to connect: to connect with family, friends, colleagues, neighbours at home, at work, at school, in your local community, at church. Connections are the cornerstones of our lives, their foundations. Our ability to connect with one another enables us to achieve just about everything we can achieve in this world,

If you dwell in me, and my words dwell in you, ask what you will, and you shall have it. This is my Father's glory, that you may bear fruit in plenty and so be my disciples.⁹

When Jesus describes himself as the vine and people as the branches that is what he is saying: connect to one other through me, and you will form a community that has substance to its foundation beyond a common interest, or a common workspace, or a common street.

⁷ <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/environmental-audit-committee/inquiries/parliament-2010/well-being/>

⁸ Luke 12: 27

⁹ John 15:7

That is what we do here in church on a Sunday morning. We connect to one another, not through work or play or locality, but through how we understand life and the way to live life. Connect in that way and your ability to connect to anyone anywhere will last forever. Connect to people through the meaning of life, and how to live life, and your connection wont last *only* as long as you are at work, or *only* as long as you are living in this community, or *only* as long as your children are at home, or *only* as long as your friends remain your friends.

Connect with one another through Jesus Christ because if he is the vine and we are the branches then the sap of the whole vine, the sap that gives it life, is love. Our lives blossom the more we keep active; they blossom more, the more we take notice of the world around us; they blossom too if we are prepared to give of ourselves for the good of others; and they blossom if we ensure we keep learning, but we live life in all its fullness when we learn to connect with one another, to live in community, to love one another.